

EDWARD ALAM

Responding to the Challenges of Post-Truth: Some Anthropological Reflections

On November 27th, 2017, I was asked to speak at Collège des Bernardins on a panel titled, the *Post-Truth World and the Eastern European Context*, not because I am Eastern European, or because I have expertise in Eastern European affairs per se, but simply because I have been working as a Lebanese philosopher with Eastern European philosophers for nearly a decade on philosophical themes we both find interesting and pertinent and mutually enriching, this paper is the fruit of that talk.

The previous month, I had the privilege of participating in seminars at Kyiv and Lviv that brought significant international voices together under the title, *Living in the Post-Truth World: Democratic Challenges, Personal Choices, and Social Sustainability*. In that setting I focused on the title's first word, *living*, and attempted to show how *post-truth* entails what I called *post-living*. The meat of my argument, without all the sociological and psychological Eastern European and Lebanese contemporary contextual dressing, went something like this: if the truth sets us free, and if freedom is neces-

sary for authentic human living and flourishing, then truth is necessary for genuine human living. Few would have problems with the second premise of this hypothetical syllogism, since no one has a problem pairing freedom with genuine living, but many would dispute or outright reject the first, as they are either uncomfortable with the very notion of truth, or simply conclude that we can never be certain of knowing it, if indeed something like it really exists.

I tried, therefore, to provide some evidence for the truth of the first premise, *the truth shall set you free*, by describing or uncovering some of the ways in which what is false enslaves us. In other words, the ways in which illusion leads to bondage. This seems easier to accept as true; and the testimony of the psychologist gives it considerably more weight. But this is not new, illusion, lying, sophistry, have always been the enemies of truth and freedom, these are perennial problems in every era. So why do we need a new phrase like *post-truth* today to capture that which is not really new after all? I am under the impression that the way we receive and communicate knowledge today is new, and a real game changer, when it comes to the very meaning of "knowing" and to some degree, justifies and partially explains why this new phrase, *post-truth*, has now emerged.

Think about it for a moment: Algorithmic information steadily flowing into our cyberspace bubbles with lightning speed, does this not prevent us from slow and careful deliberation? Bombarded by sound-bite chatter passed off as ground-breaking truth, are we not cut off from the gentle silence which invites us into truth's hidden chambers? Assaulted around the clock by electronic images carefully crafted to push an agenda inevitably tied to either big business or his twin brother, political propaganda, are we not estranged from the kind of honest and tender contemplation wherein truth graciously reveals herself to the patient and humble of heart?

Caught in a worldwide web, which few can resist or escape, we are not only told what to think about, but how to think about it. With less and less direct apprehension of nature's natural and real wonders and rhythms to guide our thought and thus our language, this epistemic transgression numbs our intellects to such a degree that many of us can no longer even ask *the Pontius Pilate question*, "What is truth?", and the reflective few who still have the time to ask it do not have the time to *wait* for an answer, not only because patience, once considered a key hinge virtue bridging the intellectual and moral virtues is rarely practiced or desired, but because the very notion of *virtue* itself is somehow incomprehensible in a world of efficient and mechanical management. Even some of the potential remedies of quiet time, getting back to nature, and spiritual meditation are neatly packaged, standardized and sanitized so as to be rapidly and effectively bought and sold and managed in cyber time and space bubbles that seriously blur the distinction between the real and the virtual.

The age-old seeds of wisdom in the Hebrew bible, wherein the psalmist declares, "The Lord delights in those who wait for his love", falls more often than not on rocky and infertile soil. We are unmoved when the same psalmist sings, "More than sentinels wait for the dawn, so my soul waits for you O Lord". We are unmoved because both the dawn and the soul, let alone any notion of heroic surrender to tender Lordship, seem so remote and unintelligible in a world of cyberspace superficiality, epistemic reductionism, and illusory control.

At any rate, I shall not go into the way I approached these themes in Kyiv or Lviv, but would like, rather, to develop my argument in the spirit of the present title, *Responding to the Challenges of Post-Truth*. And so assuming that my diagnosis of at least one aspect of the problem is more or less correct, and has not been too

distorted by reactionary hyperbole, I would like to suggest that any fruitful *response* to the challenges facing a *post-truth* society must be cognizant of the vital importance of two other transcendentals of being, the good and the beautiful. For truth, without her sisters, risks being reduced to a stiff and legalistic dogmatism that precludes all meaningful discourse and makes the sheer joy that comes from knowing the truth impossible. Isolated from the intimate companionship of her sisters, truth either grows sick of the deadly dogmatism she has become and eventually tries to take her own life, or seeks to destroy the free and spontaneous forms of life around her that challenge her rigid authoritarianism.

Similar temptations present themselves to truth's sisters, the good and the beautiful; for the good, without truth and beauty by her side, slips into judgmental moralism, while the beautiful without the solid company of the good and the true, slips into sentimentalism or perverted strands of obscene aestheticism. I can offer little justification for such an approach here which, in some ways, begs our question, though I will say that those who find difficulty in seeing the deep unity between the transcendentals of being are the same ones who struggle with admitting that they really exist in the first place.

So if truth's resurrection is to take place, her older sisters must be rescued from the dungeons in which they now dwell. In saying, her older sisters, I propose, following others much wiser than myself, that the traditional order of the transcendentals, the good, the true, and the beautiful, be reconsidered: what about the beautiful, the good, and the true? This is not pedantic playing with words, but a fundamental response to what I have called an epistemic transgression that insists on reducing all knowledge to scientific operations whose sole job is to find mechanical solutions to all problems, whatever they may be: sickness, fragility, even death and life. By considering truth

last, only after diving into beauty and the good, the category of mystery, so crucial in coming to know truth, has a chance of redeeming the epistemic deception which tricks us into believing that life is a problem to be solved, rather than a mystery to be lived, something Gabriel Marcel pointed out so clearly in the last century.

And this brings us back to the argument and back down to earth, for talk of repositioning the order of the transcendentals of being as a way of responding to a plethora of post-truth societal convolutions sounds much too abstract. But when we speak quite simply and plainly about what it means to cultivate a beautiful and fruitful relationship with another person or what it means to live a good life, then the question of the *truth* stands a chance of being heard. Not just truth in the abstract, but the *truth* of that most mysterious and perplexing question, what does it mean to be human? Who are we? What are we? Why do we exist? To begin with beauty may be more appealing than the Pontius Pilate question, “What is truth?”, and if we start with “What is beauty?”, then maybe, just maybe, and even in spite of the abysmal epistemic transgression I have been describing, it just might open us up to ask the moral questions, and even lead us to some convictions concerning which answers to these questions are closer to the truth.

Competing anthropologies today fight for our loyalty, not to mention for our investment of time and money, when it comes to this quintessentially modern question, what does it mean to be human? Trans-humanism, animalism, physicalist-emergentism; these all have intelligent adherents and arguments, all have some particular and undeniable truth to teach, all make use of powerful insights from either genetics, artificial intelligence, or neuroscience, or various combinations of these sciences to supply evidence for their positions. How do we arrive at reliable and truthful answers to this all important and most basic question? If we

attempt to apply here what I have advocated regarding the rearranging of the traditional transcendentals, we might begin by first asking, for example with respect to trans-humanism, whether and in which ways an enhanced human organ is more or less beautiful after mechanical and artificial manipulation. Is the human face, for instance, more or less beautiful with its defects, signs of aging, scars and wounds, than a face that has been enhanced? Does lessening physical fragility and vulnerability make the body more beautiful; how about the person? Or is there a beauty in fragility in that it calls out for empathy and solidarity, which are also beautiful, and maybe good, and perhaps even true? This is not to glorify fragility and brokenness, but to elicit deep human wisdom in their wake, something which Gerard Manley Hopkins beautifully captured in his poem, *The Leaden Echo*:

*How to k  ep — is there  ny any, is there none such, nowhere known
some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or catch or key
to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, ... from vanishing
away?
O is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rank d wrinkles deep,
Down? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still mes-
sengers, sad and stealing messengers of grey?
No there 's none, there 's none, O no there 's none,
Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,
Do what you may do, what, do what you may,
And wisdom is early to despair:
Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done
To keep at bay
Age and age's evils, hoar hair,
Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst, winding sheets,
tombs and worms and tumbling to decay;
So be beginning, be beginning to despair.*

*O there's none; no no no there's none:
Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, despair.*

Is there not a way in which vulnerability, and only vulnerability, can cultivate wisdom and humility? And are not these virtues beautiful, especially when we compare them to thoughtlessness and arrogance. Does not humility potentially lead to self-sacrifice and spontaneous heroic love, and are not these realities among the most beautiful, good, and, again, true?

Of course, there is something “beautiful” in a well ordered and efficient machine; I suppose the latest smart phone is beautiful in a way, but is it good, is it true? If it works properly, we could speak about its algorithms as correct or accurate, but can we really speak about true algorithms? Can we remain true and loyal to our computers and smart phones? And even if we take care of them, can they reciprocate and take care of us? Amazingly, more and more healthcare facilities are introducing robots to take care of the elderly because they are more efficient and do not get tired.

Another new anthropology (perhaps an unintended corrective to trans-humanism) and drawing upon similar discoveries in neuroscience and genetics, is contemporary animalism,¹ which presuppose and attempts to provide evidence for the thesis that the differences between human and non-human animals is one of degree only, not of kind, accidental differences which can be measured in the brain and justified by genetics. There is something quite attractive in this anthropological approach because it rightly claims that the kinds of real relationships we can have with non-human animals, and even to a lesser degree with plants, cannot be

¹ This is a variation of materialism, but what makes it new is the way in which it draws upon developments in genetics and neuroscience.

had with machines since plants and non-human animals are alive, whereas machines, of course, are not.

Nonetheless, because these animalistic anthropologies do not identify any difference of kind, but only of degree among the various life forms, we end up in similar dehumanizing dilemmas and outrageous forms of depersonalization with plant and animal rights on par with human rights, and in some cases, taking priority. And this is not to mention the almost unspeakable phenomenon of bestiality rights, of which influential moral philosophers of bioethics at Princeton, spend serious time and effort discussing and even defending.

And then there are the various combinations of trans-humanistic/animalistic anthropologies, too numerous and nuanced to address here, but all holding the basic tenets of their parent theories, which, as I have boldly claimed, ultimately lead to horrific and even nightmarish dehumanization and depersonalization without a trace of awareness or gratitude or provision for anything as outdated, old-fashioned, limiting, and childish as an all-loving and all-powerful Creator. Aldous Huxley remarkably envisioned as early as 1932 what such a *combination* of trans-humanism and animalism would look and feel like in a work that can only be described now, eighty-five years later, as prophetic; I recommend it for all my students. It is provocatively titled, *A Brave New World* wherein he brilliantly predicts that the future world will be one in which the virtue of Courage will be cut off from all the other virtues, the only “true” virtue in a post-truth world, paradoxically dogmatic, unyielding, mechanistic, beastly, with no room for the good, and certainly no room for the beautiful.